

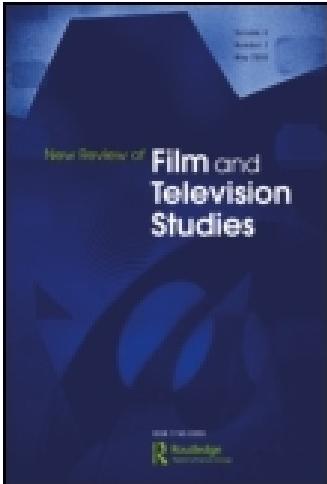
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### PRODUCTIVE DISCOMFORT IN THE CLASSROOM

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# PRODUCTIVE DISCOMFORT IN THE CLASSROOM

## *Teaching Boys Don't Cry*

*For the past few years, I've taught Kimberly Peirce's Boys Don't Cry to students at the University of Texas at Austin. They have had a range of reactions to the film including both acknowledgements that it has radically altered their views on gender and sexuality and overt hostility that they were made to watch it because it disturbed them so intensely. In this paper I examine students' writing and our class discussions in an attempt to determine how the film produced both the outrage some expressed at being 'forced' to see the film and the transformation others articulate after viewing it. This particular audience's reception of Boys Don't Cry is interesting to me in terms of what it reveals about how powerfully affect can function through romance and tragedy, and subsequently in terms of the questions it raises about how we can teach films that work primarily on an affective level.*

### **Teaching Boys Don't Cry**

I am very upset right now. *Boys Don't Cry* is probably one of the most upsetting movies that I have ever seen, and I am angry that it was mandatory for us to watch ... I do not choose classes or movies for that matter that make me feel bad. There are so many terrible things in the world, why do we have to focus on them? I would just like to read and watch things that don't interfere with my mental health. Unfortunately, I am one of those people that become severely upset when I see things like that, and I probably won't be able to shake this for quite some time. I guess what I am saying here is that I don't think this movie belongs in this course.

For the past few years, I've taught Kimberly Peirce's film *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) in my undergraduate literature and composition classes at the University of Texas at Austin. The film is a fictional recreation of the life and death of Brandon Teena, a young transgendered man living in Nebraska who was brutally murdered when he

was discovered to be biologically female. After watching *Boys Don't Cry*, one student wrote me the e-mail that I quote from above. She ends her e-mail saying, 'I realize this movie is trying to get a message across, but it is just too graphic and too disturbing to have a place in a classroom'. Although she is in the minority in terms of her reaction to the film, she was not the only student who had such strong feelings. What is it about this film that got under this student's skin so deeply? And how can we best teach texts which affect our students on such an emotional level? Finally, under what circumstances can students' discomfort be productive?

*Boys Don't Cry* stars the actress Hilary Swank as Brandon and chronicles the last few weeks of Brandon's life. We see Brandon move to Falls City, a small town in Nebraska, where he meets and falls in love with Lana, and we watch as he is eventually exposed as biologically female. After this revelation, Lana continues to love and accept Brandon but others in their circle turn on him, and Peirce does not shy away from depicting the horrifying violence they inflict on Brandon. The film was acclaimed as a breakthrough—both cinematically and because it conveyed the horrors of hate crimes so effectively—and Swank received the Academy Award for best actress. The beautiful cinematography and the excellent acting by the entire cast make the already moving story even more affecting. Moreover, the film's use of romance and tragedy as the primary modes through which it tells its story solidifies its hold on audiences' emotions.

My students have had a range of reactions to the film from acknowledgements that it has radically altered their views on gender and sexuality to overt hostility that they were made to watch it because it disturbed them so intensely. In this article, I examine their writing and our class discussions in an attempt to get at how the film produced both the outrage some expressed at being 'forced' to see the film and the transformation others articulate after viewing it. I became interested in student reception of *Boys Don't Cry* because no other text I have assigned, not even Toni Morrison's intellectually and emotionally challenging neo slave narrative *Beloved*, has produced such intense reactions in my students. I continue to teach *Boys Don't Cry*, despite the negative reactions of a few, because it is a beautifully made, rich, and accessible text that enables discussions of genders beyond male and female. Furthermore, it directly addresses hate crimes and challenges students on their own transphobia and homophobia. It is an excellent text with which to encourage students to engage with experiences beyond their own, even when those experiences make them deeply uncomfortable. I struggle, however, to strike a balance between challenging students to think critically and question their own beliefs yet not alienating them so that they close their minds.

I would like to use my experiences teaching this film—both the successes and the failures—to generate discussion about how to teach queer film and video effectively, especially in non-gay and lesbian studies courses. Because film and

video have the power to solicit particularly intense emotional reactions including, at times, audience identification, there is a political efficacy in films which position viewers to identify with queer characters, something *Boys Don't Cry* does very well. On the other hand, as my student who objected to the film's graphic violence makes clear, this identification can be a very painful experience if the film depicts violence against these characters. Moreover, *Boys Don't Cry* depicts a particularly harrowing incident of sexual violence that makes the film even more challenging to teach because of the reactions it produces in viewers. As a feminist teacher, I want to respect my students' desires to insulate themselves from images or narratives that bring up traumatic memories, but I am concerned about setting a precedent in my classes where students avoid texts which disturb them. I hope that detailing my experiences teaching the film can lead to more discussion about effective methods for dealing with productive discomfort in the classroom.

The University of Texas at Austin is the largest university in the USA. It is a campus dominated by fraternities and sororities and, like much of Texas, has a strong and vocal Christian population. Austin is an oasis of progressive politics compared to the rest of Texas; however, students at the university come from all over the state, often from small towns and rural areas where many have not had much exposure to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues, texts, or people. Due to this lack of exposure, students are often unprepared to encounter queer material. I've taught *Boys Don't Cry* in both a rhetoric class, 'Prom Queens and Freaks: The Rhetoric of Girls on Film', and a literature course, 'Women's Popular Genres: Romance and Sentimentality'. In the popular genres course I used the film to illustrate how powerfully affect functions through romance, while in the teen girl course, the portrayal of a transgendered character stands in contrast with the more homogenous representations of teenagers on film that usually circulate. In both courses, however, I had other motives as well. I wanted to discuss gender and sexuality, to raise awareness about hate crimes, and to stimulate discussion on The James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Act which was up for debate in the Texas state legislature at the time.<sup>1</sup>

## Teaching affect

The first time I taught *Boys Don't Cry*, I began by having each student answer two questions aloud: how does this film position you as a viewer (i.e. who does it ask you to relate to, identify with, or desire), and how does that make you feel? Everyone was asked to speak and no one was allowed to respond to anyone else's comments at first because I wanted to get our raw, uncensored emotions out rather than beginning with a more analytical discussion. The strength of this exercise was that we were all able to hear each other's reactions to the film and speak without the fear of being attacked; as a result, even the shy students spoke

and people gave what seemed to be very honest answers. The drawback was that some of the responses were homophobic or transphobic, and nobody could respond to these comments because of the rules I had set up. I handled this by trying to write down particular points I wanted to work into our discussion the next day in order to counter some of the more ignorant or phobic statements, and I noticed that a number of students also returned to comments from the previous day that they had clearly been seething over. These comments ranged from 'Brandon was sick. That is a disease. We learned about it in psychology' to 'Poor, uneducated people in those rural places are so messed up.' During the next class we discussed, among a number of other issues, how definitions of disease reflect the prejudices of a particular time and how the film perpetuates class bias. It was uncomfortable, however, to have those types of comments go unanswered, if even for a day. On the other hand, our discussions in the following days were energetic and heated, and students were not afraid to talk about the emotions the film raised. I believe going around the room that first day and having everyone speak laid the groundwork for this dynamic discussion and established the legitimacy of examining our emotional reactions to the film.

The second time I taught the film I had students do a free-writing exercise for 10 minutes at the beginning of class where they responded to those same questions about where they were positioned as viewers. Since they weren't giving their response quite so publicly and had time to think before answering, students were less inhibited about what they said and I received more in-depth and well-developed answers. I also received a number of angry responses by students who felt they shouldn't have been made to see *Boys Don't Cry* because it upset them so deeply, something that didn't happen the first time I taught the film. One drawback to this exercise was that everyone didn't get to hear everybody else's perspective. However, it still allowed people a chance to respond emotionally to the film before moving onto an analytical discussion. Moreover, it acknowledged that some of the film's most important work operates on an affective level.

In both exercises students responded overwhelmingly that they identified with Brandon, although that made some of them uncomfortable. One student puts it this way:

BDC positioned me in terms of Brandon. Everything we see is from Brandon's point of view. At first this made me uncomfortable b/c I have never seen a movie from the point of view of a sexually ambiguous character before. It took a little adjusting to at the beginning, but throughout the movie I found myself hoping things would work out for Brandon.

Others wrote that they identified with Brandon, they liked Brandon, and they empathized with him. They described his struggle as 'universal'; he wanted to find himself and to be with the girl he loved. Interestingly, the female students also

wrote about wanting to protect and care for him. This identification with either Brandon or, in some cases with Lana, Brandon's girlfriend, provides a way into a story some students wouldn't normally want to enter. Discussing how the film gets us to identify with Brandon and/or Lana allowed us to consider how we construct masculinity culturally as well as what makes Brandon so appealing (e.g. his James Dean bad-boy quality and sensitive masculinity, his desire to please, his all-American white-boy looks, etc.).

We moved from the observation that many of us felt like we were positioned to identify with Brandon to discussions of how the film achieved that positioning. What type of camera work, editing, and narrative structures made us see things from Brandon's perspective? For instance, when did the film use point of view shots and to what effect? Who knows the 'secret' of Brandon's gender and when? Which attempts to position us were successful and which failed? In addition, we discussed what techniques the film uses to get us to identify with Lana. Finally, we considered the film's use of romance as a vehicle to get us to engage emotionally and enter the story. From my perspective as a teacher, these were extremely useful and productive discussions. Because many students were being asked to position themselves in ways they hadn't before—for instance by identifying with a transgendered character—they were able to see the mechanisms all films use to position viewers more clearly.

A third exercise I'd like to share came in response to repeated comments that Brandon was 'tricking' people by living as a boy. As much as they liked Brandon, students emphasized over and over how uncomfortable this 'deception' made them. For instance, one woman wrote, 'I felt sorry for Brandon but he was lying', while another said 'She is such a liar and Lana is totally tricked.'<sup>2</sup> A third woman made what I thought was a very honest comment that gets to the heart of much of this fear when she wrote, 'It would be weird to be making out with what I thought was a boy and find out later he wasn't exactly.' To get at these issues, I asked students to think about what the 'truth' of gender is in the film. To facilitate this we drew up a list on the board of all the different ways in which Brandon was perceived in the film. He is referred to as a boy, a girl, a dyke, a lesbian, a faggot, a hermaphrodite, someone with a sexual identity crisis, and 'it'. Then we tried to determine what definition of Brandon's gender the film was privileging. Who does the film want us to see Brandon as? From there we moved on to discuss whether there is a 'truth' of gender. It was a very spirited discussion because class members ranged from diehard women's studies students who believe gender is a performance and cite Judith Butler in class to students who argue that biology is destiny and anyone who has female genitals is a woman. At the very least, I hope, this discussion made everybody realize that the truth of gender is contested and that other definitions besides their own exist.

An important point that needs mentioning, however, is that some people do not need their eyes opened to transgendered identity or the hate directed at those

who don't conform to gender norms. As Craig Willse explains in an article that details his experience seeing the film with a group of transgendered teenagers living in a group home, many people live with these realities everyday. I assumed that my students needed their eyes opened to the realities of hate crimes and the prejudice against people who don't conform to gender norms, yet in each class someone surprised me. For instance, one woman wrote that she identified with Brandon in part because she had experienced what it felt like to be different in a small town when her mother left her father to live with another woman. I knew I had gay students in the class, but when I looked at this young woman I had no idea that she would have had such an intimate experience with homophobia. Although she had never been persecuted like Brandon, this experience made her all too aware of the consequences of transgressing gender boundaries, especially in a small town. But regardless of exceptions like this one, for almost all of the students in my classes so far, the film is eye-opening.

The overwhelming majority of the students I've shown this film to have said they were glad to have seen it. A large number of students tell me it is the most moving and challenging text we read or see in the course, while a smaller number say it is one of the most challenging films they have ever seen. These students say the film made them look at gender differently and forced them to question whether someone's biology determines their gender as well as caused them to identify with and care for a transgendered character. One student, a very smart but also very conservative athlete, summarized his experience of the film in this way:

To be honest I felt a little judgmental about people with 'gender identity crisis'. I thought: why would someone choose to live a lie and try to fool others into believing you are a gender that you are not? I wondered if they were bringing problems onto themselves, but after seeing this movie, I have changed my mind. Watching the constant stress Brandon was under to try to maintain her image as a man, the shame, the fear, and ultimately the violent end of her life, I can see this is not something she chose to do lightly ... If Brandon was willing to go to such lengths to try to live that way, it must be an honest representation of who she felt she was inside.

He still uses the female pronoun to refer to Brandon, but I interpret his words to mean that his definition of gender has expanded and this feels like a huge success to me.

Along with considering what *Boys Don't Cry* does well, however, any discussion of the film should address what it leaves out. In particular, as teachers we must ask which queer texts are chosen as representative and shown in courses and what is often left out either of those films or of our discussions about them. *Boys Don't Cry* is an Oscar-winning film about a charming, attractive, young white

man killed by two poor, uneducated men. Craig Willse makes an important point when he asks, ‘Why must the transgender cross-over hit concern crimes against white people? Why must the story we run to see have poor rural drunks as the criminals? ...Where is the national mourning for black, latino and asian bodies?’ (Willse 2000, p. 19). I’d like to consider how we can teach texts which may leave out some complicated issues—like *Boys Don’t Cry*’s erasure of Phillip Devine, the African-American man found murdered with Brandon Teena, from its narrative—without replicating that omission in our classrooms.

While not all students were willing to examine their views on gender in depth, all were united in their horror over the sexual assault and murder of Brandon. The film became a way for us to discuss the prevalence of hate crimes against gays and lesbians, the transgendered, and people of color, and we connected Brandon’s death to the murder of James Byrd Jr. in Jasper, Texas. This became a way to raise the racial issues the film erases through its omission of Devine from the murder scene. I handed out Willse’s article criticizing this move on the filmmaker’s part and asked students about why they think the character was left out. In one class, we also watched the documentary *The Brandon Teena Story* (1998), which includes Phillip Devine in its narrative. This led to discussions about how films often leave out complexities in order to make things simpler.

## Productive discomfort

*Boys Don’t Cry* is particularly effective at depicting the brutality of both Brandon Teena’s murder and the sexual assault that took place a few days before the murder, and, as I mentioned, some students object to these scenes’ graphic violence. One student was very specific about what exactly upset her: ‘I am 22 years old, a voting citizen and the right to freedom [sic]. I can watch what movies I want to watch and as a free citizen I choose NOT to watch any movies containing sexual assault.’ I was taken off guard—not by how much the film upset her because it affects me emotionally as well—but by her belief that this made it inappropriate to assign to a class. I thanked both students who expressed this belief for their responses and told them I was sorry they felt violated by the film, and we discussed their feelings as we talked about everyone’s reactions to the films. I thought we had a productive debate and were able to compare *Boys Don’t Cry*’s tactics to an anti-choice display that was concurrently up on campus and which generated a lot of controversy because of its large size, graphic photos of aborted fetuses, and comparisons between abortion and the Holocaust.<sup>3</sup>

I still feel concerned, however, that, in my persistence to push students to face their discomfort and use it productively as part of our discussions, I didn’t address some of their responses adequately. I did warn all the students before watching the film that it was emotionally devastating for many viewers and that it

contained a graphic rape scene, and I assumed students would opt out of watching the film if they felt that they needed to. I also asked everybody to discuss the emotions the film produced rather than simply to watch dispassionately and attempt an analytical discussion that required they not express their feelings. Other students passionately defended the inclusion of the film in the course and the filmmaker's depiction of violence, stating that the violence gave the film part of its power and made a strong statement against hate crimes. However, I'm left with very mixed emotions. How do we respect student's desires to shield themselves from pain or trauma, and yet encourage them to engage with challenging texts? And what types of trauma is it legitimate for students to shield themselves from? If someone wants to avoid images of sexual assault because he or she is a survivor, is that similar to another student wanting to avoid the deeply disturbing feelings about slavery that *Beloved* produces?

I believe, as I insisted to these two young women, that education can be, at times, disturbing. Being asked to question what we believe and go outside of our own experiences, even if only imaginatively, is scary, but that does not make it inappropriate for a classroom. I would argue, in fact, that my own experiences with productive discomfort are when I have learned the most. This is one of the real values of a liberal arts education—it can ask us to engage with others' experiences, emotionally and analytically, and to challenge our beliefs. But are texts which make us relive painful past experiences or confront our deepest fears the same thing as texts which ask us to question our assumptions?

As my students asserted, the scene where Brandon is raped by the two men who eventually murder him is incredibly painful to watch. The cinematography, the editing, and the soundtrack are relentless; we witness the violence against Brandon up close and there is no escape or respite. Moreover, the scene seems to last forever and contains very few cuts. While many films distance viewers from a rape or desensitize them to the sexual violence on screen, *Boys Don't Cry* continues our identification with Brandon and forces us to witness the entire traumatic event and its aftermath. It is horrifying. Thus far when I've taught the film, I've addressed the rape as a hate crime that happens to Brandon because he is transgendered. We discuss how the rape is an attempt to turn Brandon back into a woman and is a way of disciplining him for his transgressions. Perhaps further discussion of rape and its relation to power and patriarchy would help the students who voiced objections about seeing films which depict sexual violence. Maybe changing the way I address that scene would alter students' reactions to the film and mitigate some of their outrage.

However, the violence was not the only thing students found disturbing about *Boys Don't Cry*; their reactions reveal some students' discomfort at being exposed to queer sexuality and characters who don't conform to gender norms. Although I assign gay and lesbian texts ranging from essays by Dorothy Allison and James Baldwin to films such as *Heavenly Creatures* and *All Over Me* in every class I teach, I

have never encountered as much resistance as I did to *Boys Don't Cry*. Most students are comfortable with—and, at this point, used to—seeing non-threatening gay characters in films. For instance, no one reacts negatively to Cher's gay male shopping buddy when I show the film *Clueless*. On the other hand, transgendered characters, especially ones who pass, unsettle many students. The discussion of 'tricking' was one attempt I made to address this. Yet dealing with this kind of transphobia is difficult logically and emotionally. In one response paper I received a student said, 'I do not agree with the lifestyle that Teena Brandon chose. I am a Christian and believe that what she did was wrong and disgusting. Why did she want to be a boy?' As always, these comments are hard to answer and, on an emotional level, hard to read. I didn't want to react so negatively that I risked her closing her mind and never speaking in class again, but, as a lesbian and a trans ally, it makes me angry to hear this kind of ignorance and hatred. In this case, I gave her feedback on her argument in the paper and discussed her tone in terms of name-calling and losing credibility as well as alienating her audience. Finally, I wrote, 'One last question, what connection do you think there is between John's hatred of Brandon for being different (and his eventual rape and murder of him) and much of society's "disgust" with Brandon?' By quoting her language I meant to implicate her but again, I have mixed feelings: was I too easy on her? Would she have learned more from being challenged even more directly?

Films have the potential to allow audiences to temporarily experience what it is like to live as someone else, if only in our imaginations; and films which work primarily on an affective level can solicit powerful emotional identifications that may make us deeply uncomfortable. Having our beliefs challenged can lead to transformation or to anger and reification of those beliefs. I want to choose texts that encourage my students to engage with lives that are different from their own or that make them think critically, yet it's important to me that I teach these texts in ways that respect the experiences students bring to the films. I struggle to know when the discomfort my students express at encountering a text is productive and when it isn't, when I need to push them to work through it and when I don't. But despite my conflicts and my mistakes, I'm often able to watch someone think critically for the first time about a belief they have previously taken for granted. That, to me, is the beauty of a liberal arts education.

## Notes

- 1 James Byrd Jr. was an African-American man who was brutally murdered by three white supremacists in Jasper, Texas in the summer of 1998. The James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Act passed the legislature and was signed into law in May 2001.

- 2 As you can see, my students use different pronouns to refer to Brandon. Early on in our discussions I raise the issue of gender and pronouns, and I explain why I refer to Brandon as 'he'. Students often have heated debates about this, and although many students end up using 'he' a number adamantly believe if someone is biologically female they must be called 'she'.
- 3 Justice For All, the group that came to our campus, set up a large booth and a number of huge posters of victims of genocide to make the argument that abortion is genocide. Needless to say, the week-long exhibit caused many emotional reactions.

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